

The War-torn Societies Project in Eritrea



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In 1991, following 30 years of war with Ethiopia, Eritrea became the youngest African state. After delivering political independence, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (now called the People's Front for Democracy and Justice) formed the nation's first government and began to confront the challenges of post-war reconstruction and development.

But the new government soon found itself at odds with the development assistance community over how to proceed. From the outset, the Eritrean leadership was determined "not to let the war-born sense of self-sufficiency and independence slip away in the entanglements of international aid agreements, policy packages or the conditions attached to them," states a report by the Geneva-based [War-torn Societies Project](#) (WSP).

"External agencies — bilateral, multilateral or non-governmental — are generally not accustomed to this. Elsewhere they have usually found willing partners to listen to their proposals," continues the WSP report: *war-torn societies project in Eritrea*. "[They] expect the Eritreans to 'get their act together' and develop 'normal' working relationships with the external world and its representatives."

Joint effort

A joint effort of the [United Nations Research Institute for Social Development](#) (UNRISD) and the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS) of the Geneva [Graduate Institute of International Studies](#), the War-torn Societies Project was established with financial support from the International Development Research Centre and 27 other donors. In June 1995, WSP officials launched a two-year initiative in Eritrea that brought government and external representatives together to discuss priorities for reconstruction and to conduct action-research.

For the government, one of the attractions of this project was that "WSP methodology did not impose any external agenda," says Alemseged Tesfai, WSP Senior Researcher and the former Land Commissioner of Eritrea. Instead, WSP gave the government "a way of explaining itself to international donors. We found this an extremely exhilarating experience," he adds.

Country Note

After tackling various logistical issues and commissioning background papers, the project team — led by Dr Tesfai Ghermazien (the Eritrean Minister of Agriculture) and Dr Berhane Woldemichael — drafted a 'Country Note', which "provided a broad overview of key issues in Eritrean reconstruction and development." Various sections of the document discussed the positive and negative legacies of the Eritrean conflict, future challenges, post-conflict experiences of reconstruction, local initiatives, and the role of external actors.

The Country Note was presented in February 1996 to the first meeting of the Project Group. "The meeting itself constituted an important and unprecedented event: it assembled all relevant external actors and a large number of internal actors for a full day of relatively open discussion, ... breaking new ground in Eritrea," states the WSP report.

Research themes

During the meeting, participants selected five themes as 'entry points' for further research: food security, social reintegration, human resource development, infrastructure, and governance. "External actors tended to propose more short-term relief and conflict-related issues, or to look at issues in a short-term perspective," notes the report, "while the Eritreans chose longer-term concerns, or preferred to look at the same issues in a longer-term developmental perspective."

At this point, Working Groups were formed around each theme and five core researchers were recruited. Gradually, the project gained momentum. The Working Groups "became highly animated discussion groups" — in part because "for the first time, they provided a channel for substantive communication between the Eritrean Government and non-governmental, mostly external actors."

Communication channel

"Representatives of NGOs or multilateral agencies, for example, reported that it was through WSP that they had come to better appreciate the rationale of government policies," states the WSP report. "Government members for their part said they had come to appreciate the value of such a channel as a way of communicating the government's position better, sometimes adding that ... the Eritrean Government has not been particularly effective in communicating its policies to the outside world."

The project, which officially ended in October 1997, resulted in five research papers addressing each of the five themes. One paper was particularly well received. *Governance: issues and the Eritrean context*, by Alemseged Tesfai, "provoked a good deal of interest and discussion even outside WSP circles," in part because "it brought together and explained a whole range of recent government initiatives and measures and put them in a broader perspective before a body of external actors." Moreover, the paper raised "fundamental questions about government/external actor relations and the premises of international assistance."

Main lesson

Although the WSP Eritrea project was short-lived, "it nevertheless whetted appetites for a different kind of communication between internal and external actors," stresses the *war-torn societies project in Eritrea* report. "The main lesson that Eritrea taught WSP was that its key value lay in its role as a facilitator and venue for dialogue ... Once this was realized, it became clear that WSP

could, and did, help Eritrea in turn to reflect on the value of overcoming crucial communication gaps in policy preparation, and in engaging in broader informal dialogue on issues of shared policy interest."

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